

Throw Aways

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Summary: Two kids are thrust into Jim and Blair's care after they witness a murder

Throw Aways

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I write for the pleasure it brings. It's fun. So, enjoy.

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Oh, hi! wave Since you're here I want to say *thanks* to Jen. She's been my Beta Beast for the last couple years, and I don't know what I did before she came along. *Thank you, Jen!*

HUGS

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"Pretty much all the honest truth-telling there is in the world is done by children."

—

~~ Oliver Wendell Holmes ~~

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"THROW AWAYS"

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Scott Carter and his cousin, Jeffrey Allen, had been in Cascade for several weeks and were not having an easy time of it. The deal they had made to sell some hot merchandise had fallen through leaving them broke. Finally, out of desperation, Scott and Jeff had sold the goods to a pawnshop for less than a quarter of what it was worth... barely enough to rent a room over an adult bookstore. They would need a place to crash until they were able to get some money together and decide what to do.

It was lam in Cascade and a brutal, bloody murder was taking place in a dimly lit alley. A nine-year-old girl sat on the ground, hidden between several trashcans with her six-year-old brother huddled beside her. Eyes wide with fear, they were too afraid to look away from the horrendous act of violence unfolding before them. Too afraid of being discovered to do anything but watch.

"The body was discovered at approximately 6am, just hours after the murder took place, when a kitchen worker from Riley's restaurant went out to the alley to dump some trash," Captain Simon Banks explained from his position behind his desk. "He found the two kids a few minutes laterâ€| after he'd called 911. Apparently they witnessed the murder and then were too afraid to run away because it meant stepping over the dead man."

"Has anyone talked to them since that night?" Blair asked, caring concern reflected in his face.

"They were too upset to say anything at the scene, and as far as I know, they still haven't said anything. Child Welfare was trying to place them in foster homes, but when the kids found out they would be split up they bolted. I understand they led everyone on a merry chase before they got out of the building."

Blair hid a grin behind his hand and mumbled, "Good for them."

Jim's Sentinel hearing picked up his observer/partner's words easily and managed to clear his throat to hide his own smile of agreement.

"What was that, Sandburg?!" Simon huffed, not knowing if he should be angry or not.

"Nothâ€|," Blair began.

"And don't *nothing, Simon* me!"

Blair blushed, then said, "It's just that I don't blame the kids for running away. Child Welfare should not have even *considered* splitting them up after what they've been through. They witnessed a murder, then sat in an alley between garbage cans all night feeling trapped by a dead body for crying out loud!"

"I won't say I disagree with you, Sandburg, but it hasn't made our investigation any easier. The case is nearly a week old now because those kids disappeared."

"Who finally found the kids," Jim asked, defusing the subject somewhat.

"They were caught last night stealing food at a convenience store," Simon replied.

"What would you like us to do, sir?"

"Go talk to them."

"Why us? Wouldn't Conner be the better one to send on this?"

"Normally, I would probably agree with you, but I've seen Sandburg around children and I think the kids will relate well with him."

Jim turned to look at Blair with a wide grin.

"Don't even say it, Jim," Blair said, pointing an accusing finger at the big Detective.

"I couldn't let them be split up, man," Blair said, glancing up at Jim as the two kids went into the loft ahead of them.

"If I had a problem with it, Chief, I would have said something," Jim sighed. "I didn't want them split up either. I'll give Simon a call and let him know they're here."

"Thanks, Jim." Blair turned to the kids as Jim closed and locked the door. "Okay, let's get you two cleaned up, then we'll have dinner." He headed towards the bathroom saying, "So who's in the tub first?"

Tandy and Charlie Michaels looked at each other and grinned. It had been a long time since they'd had a real bath. They were lucky if they were able to wash up in a gas station restroom once or twice a week.

The water faucet in the tub came on and a metallic *clunk* was heard as the drain's stopper was put in place.

Blair stuck his head out the door and waved a bottle of bubble bath in the air with a grin. "Well, who's it going to be?"

"With hot water?" Tandy inquired.

"Yep."

Charlie tugged on his sister's arm and she bent down to let him whisper in her ear. When she straightened up again, she said, "Charlie wants to know if we both get new water."

"I think that can be arranged," Jim said with a smile.

Tandy smiled shyly and started towards the bathroom. "I'll go first then."

An hour and a half later Tandy and Charlie sat at the table, dressed in Blair's T-shirts and boxers pinned at the waist to hold them up, and hungrily eating their chicken noodle soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. After a dessert of strawberry ice cream, Blair settled the two kids on the big sofa with blankets and pillows to watch cartoons on the cable Cartoon Network, then joined Jim in the kitchen to clean up.

"You know, Chief, Tandy and Charlie are not your average runaways," Jim stated, keeping his voice low.

"What do you mean," Blair asked as he handed the bigger man another plate to dry.

"They obviously haven't been on the street that long. Sure, they were dirty and hungry when they were found, but if they'd been on their own very long, they would've become a little bit more street wise. They're way to trusting of people. Most runaways are suspicious of anyone in authority and wouldn't be willing to give their first name... never mind giving the cops their last names."

"But, Jim, they're awfully young, maybe..."

"No," Jim interrupted, "I've seen kids as young as Charlie that are damn street wise and old beyond their years."

"You don't think they're runaways, do you?" Blair questioned, peeking over his shoulder at the two children watching cartoons. "So what do you think happened?"

"I think they're *throw aways*, Chief," Jim replied sadly. "Their parents either dropped them off somewhere and left them... or just packed up and left in the middle of the night."

"That sucks!" Blair growled.

Jim sighed, "Yeah it does, but at least we got these two off the streets."

By the time they finished the dishes, Jim and Blair found Tandy and Charlie sound asleep. One curled up at either end of the sofa. Jim and Blair tucked the blankets snugly around them and turned out the living room lights.

"We'll leave the kitchen light on in case one of them wakes up in the night," Blair whispered softly as he and Jim headed for their respective rooms.

Jim nodded, "Good night, Chief."

The phone rang at 6:30 the next morning.

Tandy reached up from under the covers and picked the up the cordless receiver. "'lo?" her small voice was soft and sleepy.

"Thanks, Tandy, I've got it," Blair whispered, smiling as he gently took the phone away from the young girl.

Tandy released the phone and rolled over on the sofa. She was back to sleep before Blair could blink.

"Morning, Simon," Blair finally said into the receiver as he walked towards the stairs that led up to Jim's room. He knew from the caller ID box that the caller was Captain Banks.

"Sandburg, have you or Jim talked to the press about the kids since you picked them up?" Simon asked, his voice sounding a bit on edge.

"No, sir, we haven't seen any reporters at all."

Jim was yawning and sitting on the edge of the bed as Blair got to the top of the stairs.

"Let me talk to Jim," Simon sighed.

Blair handed the phone to Jim and sat down next to him.

"Morning, Simon," Jim said, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Have you seen this morning's paper yet?" Simon growled.

"No, sir, I haven't seen the paper yet."

"The kids story is on the front page."

"Damn! How the hell did that happen?"

"I don't know, but consider them in protective custody as of now. I'm sending a unit over to watch your building. For now I think they're safe enough with you and Blair at the loft."

"Yes, sir, not a problem," Jim said, then clicked the cordless off and handed it to Blair.

"Tandy and Charlie are in protective custody, aren't they?" Blair asked quietly.

Jim nodded, leaning back onto his elbows. "Yeah, whoever committed the murder will know there are two witnesses as soon as they see the paper."

"It will probably be on the TV news too."

Jim nodded. "Well, we knew it would happen eventually. Are they still asleep?"

"Yeah, but I imagine they'll be up soon enough. They were sound

asleep at nine o'clock last night."

Scott threw the newspaper down on Jeffrey's chest, startling the man out of sleep.

"Hey, what the hell's going on?!" Jeff cried, jerking awake.

"You just had to kill that guy didn't you?!" Scott raved as he stormed back out of the bedroom. "Everything's been going just *fine* until now!"

"What are you talking about?" Jeff yawned, ignoring the paper and rolling over to go back to sleep. "No one saw us."

"WRONG!!" Scott called from the other room. "You are so wrong!"

Jeff rolled back and sat up.

Scott stuck his head back inside the bedroom and pointed to the newspaper. "Two kids saw us in that alley. They saw you murder that guy."

"Oh shit!" Jeff mumbled as he picked up the paper and began to read the front-page article.

"Why'd you have to kill him, Jeff? Why?!"

"Because he pissed me off," Jeff stated flatly, reading through the article. "He should've just given us the money instead of lying to us. Now shut up and let me think."

After breakfast, Jim sat and watched *Dr. Doolittle* staring Eddie Murphy on HBO with Tandy and Charlie while Blair went shopping.

When Blair returned three hours later, he was loaded down with groceries and packages. One of the officers from downstairs had helped him carry things up, so he only had to make one trip from the car.

Jim stood as he heard the men approaching the loft's door, recognizing Blair's voice as he spoke to the officer trailing him. Pulling open the door before Blair knocked, Jim said, "I was beginning to think you'd run out on me there, Chief." The twinkle in his eyes betraying the growl in his voice. Jim took the packages from Officer Polken. "Everything okay down there?"

"Yes, sir. All's quiet," Officer Polken said with a smile. "How are the kids doing?"

Jim smiled, "They seem to be adjusting. We've been trying to keep them busy."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. I have three of my own at home."

"We'll keep that in mind if we need any advice," Blair grinned as he handed two cold sodas to Polken for him and his partner. "Thanks for

helping me carry the stuff up."

Officer Polken chuckled as turned to leave. "No problem. Thanks for the sodas."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Scott said grimly.

"It's the only way," Jeff argued. "We get rid of the witnesses and we are home free."

"But they're just kids... and they're in protective custody."

"And that's a problem?"

"How would we get past the cops?" Scott questioned. "We don't even know where they are!"

"Leave that to me," Jeff grinned.

"Oh WOW!!" Charlie cried as he tore into his package, heedless of the colorful paper it was wrapped in. Inside the box was an assortment of cars and trucks, and a small snap together track. "Hot Wheels! Cool!" Charlie immediately dropped to the floor to play.

Blair grinned from the kitchen as he watched Jim help the kids with their presents while he put the groceries away.

"Go ahead, Tandy, open yours," Jim coaxed gently.

The young girl looked at the neatly wrapped box in front of her. Tandy smiled shyly and began to carefully unwrap her gift. Then she took equal care to fold the brightly colored paper and set it aside. Inside the box, Tandy found two Barbie dolls with three outfits each. "Oooh, thank you," she gasped as she reached in to retrieve the wonderful prizes inside.

"You are very welcome," Jim grinned. Tandy's wide eyes and bright smile warmed him.

Tandy looked down at Charlie, who was pushing his cars around the bare wood floor. "Charlie, did you thank Jim and Blair?"

Charlie stopped making motor sounds long enough to look up with a wide grin and say, "Thank you!"

Blair and Jim chuckled and watched as the little boy went back to his play.

There were also coloring books and a large plastic container of 250 crayons, along with clothes for the kids.

"You did good, Chief," Jim told his partner when Blair joined him at the table. "How much do I owe you?"

Blair handed Jim the receipts. "Whatever you think is fair, man."

Jeffrey Allen spent several hours in the guise of a reporter at the Cascade Police Station. He hoped to blend in with the other media people there and find out information that would help locate the witnesses.

The clerk at the desk was fielding phone calls and trying to tell the reporters that she had no information, when she let it slip that the children were staying with one of the detectives in Major Crimes.

Jeff went outside and used a payphone to call the station and ask for Major Crimes.

"Yes, I need to speak to one of your Detectives," Jeff said when he was connected to Major Crimes. "I may have information about the murder that involved those two kids."

Jeff was put on hold and transferred to the Captain's office.

"Banks," Simon barked into the phone.

"Are you in charge of the murder case involving those kids?"

"No, that would be Detective Ellison and he's not available at the moment. I can take any information you have and make sure he receives it."

—

Click.

"Hello?" Simon frowned as the dial tone buzzed in his ear.

Jeff stood in the phone booth, his hand still on the receiver he'd just hung up. It was a long shot, but it was the only one they had. If his hunch was right, those kids were with Detective Ellison. Now all he needed to do was find out where Ellison lived.

The next morning, Jim had to go in to the station to take care of some paperwork and discuss the case with Simon. He slipped into his jacket and unlocked the door. "Okay, Samuals and Clark are on duty downstairs this morning. I shouldn't be at the station for more than two or three hours. You know the drill here."

"Yeah, Jim, we'll be fine," Blair said, joining the Detective at the door.

Jim pulled the door shut behind him and waited to hear Blair lock up before moving towards the elevator.

"How did you get this address anyway?" Scott Carter asked his cousin

as they drove through Cascade.

"I went to the library and checked through some old newspapers. I found one about an incident that happened at Ellison's apartment," Jeff sneered. "I checked out the address last night until I found one with cops sitting watch outside in an unmarked car."

"You're sure it's the right address?" Scott asked nervously.

Jeff glanced over at his cousin. "Will you stop worrying! It's the right address."

"What about the cops outside the place?"

"Not a problem. I've got it covered."

A few minutes later, Jeff pulled the car over to the curb and parked. They could just see the car that Officers Samuals and Clark were sitting in parked in the small lot.

Blair was sitting on the sofa, playing with Charlie as the 6-year-old used him as a mountain pass for his little trucks. Tandy sat on the loveseat playing with her Barbies, making up quiet conversations between the dolls.

Hearing snips of the girl's words, Blair thought he heard her mention something about 'runaway mommies'. He was about to ask Tandy about their parents, find out why two children were alone on the streets, when there was a knock at the door.

Startled because he knew that Samuals and Clark would have called before coming up, Blair called, "Who is it?!"

"Delivery!" came an unfamiliar voice.

Standing and quietly telling the kids to stay put, Blair moved to stand next to the locked door. "Just leave it by the door please," he called without making a move to open it. "Thanks."

There was a moment of silence, then, "Someone has to sign for it."

"Who's the package from?" Blair asked. He was trying to determine if it was possibly a legitimate delivery or not, eyeing the cordless phone where it sat in its base on the endtable.

A thud sounded and Blair jumped, realizing that someone was trying to kick the door open. With no further hesitation, he gathered Tandy and Charlie and directed them towards his room.

"Blair, what's happening?!" Tandy cried, clinging to his arm as they moved quickly through the apartment.

"Everything's going to be okay," Blair said quickly, trying to keep his voice calm. "I'm going to take care of you guys."

Just as Blair got the kids into his bedroom, the loft's door burst open. He got a glimpse of the two men entering as he slammed the

french doors shut. Blair knew there wasn't much time to get the kids out the fire escape and quickly freed the iron bar that Jim had fashioned for security across the door.

Blair pushed Charlie out first. "Get going down the steps! Don't stop and don't look back, no matter what! We'll be right behind you!" he told the boy. When he turned to do the same with Tandy, the bedroom doors flew open, sending shattered glass everywhere.

Tandy screamed and flung her arms around Blair's waist.

Blair saw the gun come up as he turned to face the two men. He tried to pull Tandy around, to shield her with his body and get her out the door, but as he tried to push her behind him, the bullet slammed through her shoulder and into Blair's abdomen. The force of the bullet sent the small girl into Blair, who stumbled back into the wall under the impact and the pain that exploded in him. He sank to the floor, holding the unconscious nine-year-old against him.

Stunned and in pain, Blair didn't hear the curses as the two assailants ran out of the loft. He struggled to move Tandy off his lap so he could check her. "No!" he cried when he saw the blood soaking the girl's clothes. "Oh God... no!" Blair found the entrance and exit wounds in Tandy's shoulder and pressed his shaking hands against them in hopes of stopping the bleeding. "Hang on, sweetheart, help's coming."

Blair tried to ignore the pain that was pulsing through his stomach and concentrate on remaining conscious even as darkness began to claim him. He couldn't let Tandy bleed to death. He had told her that he would take care of them.

Six-year-old Charlie Michaels burst off the elevator on the seventh floor of the Cascade Police Station and ran head long into Detective Joel Taggart.

"Hey there, champ, what's the rush?" Joel asked the boy.

Charlie looked up at the Detective with tears streaming down his face and sobs racking his small body. "Need Jim," he managed to get out in a small, frightened voice.

"Ellison?" Joel asked, picking the boy up.

Charlie nodded silently.

Jim heard Charlie's quiet sobs as Joel entered Major Crimes with the boy in his arms. "Charlie?!" Jim stood and took the boy as Charlie reached out to him. "What are you doing here? Where's Blair and your sister?"

"Bad men came in and Blair told me to run, but him and Tandy didn't come out," Charlie sobbed into Jim's shoulder.

"How did you get here?" Jim asked as he tried to sooth the boy.

"I ran and ran and didn't look back. That's what Blair told me to

do."

"You did good, Charlie." Jim still wondered how the small boy found his way across town to the Police Station alone, but decided that wasn't what was important.

Simon looked up from his desk and, seeing Jim holding the distraught Charlie, quickly exited his office. "Jim, what's going on?"

Jim turned as Simon approached. "Something's happened at the loft."

Without a word, Simon went to the nearest phone.

Megan stepped up, holding her arms out to Charlie. "I'll stay here with the boy," she volunteered.

"Nonono!" Charlie cried, clinging to Jim's neck.

Jim tightened his hold on the small boy in his arms for a moment and whispered, "Charlie, I need to go find Tandy and Blair, but I need your help here." He waited until Charlie sat back, giving Jim his full attention. "You can help by staying here and telling Megan what you heard and saw. It's important... okay?"

After a moment, Charlie nodded and wiped at his tear-streaked face.

Jim smiled a little and patted the child on the back. "Good boy."

Simon dropped the receiver back into its cradle and looked at Jim. "Nothing's been reported in that area, but they aren't having any luck contacting Samuals and Clark."

"No one is usually home in the building this time of day." Jim frowned. "Colette's store is on the other side of the building and they probably wouldn't have heard anything because they play music in there. Between the volume and the beat of the bass, I can barely dial it down enough sometimes. Samuals and Clark would have reported if they could."

"I've dispatched several units to the loft to check on it. We'll meet them there."

Jim and Simon, along with backup and medical aid, pulled up in front of the building at 852 Prospect. They found Officers Samuals and Clark in their car. Samuals was alive but unconscious, and Clark was dead.

Jim immediately tuned his hearing to the loft apartment on the third floor that he shared with Blair.

"Are they up there?" Simon asked when he noticed Jim head cocked slightly.

Jim nodded. "I hear two heartbeats." One was definitely Blair's, he would know his Guide anywhere. Both were slow and weak. "We need to

hurry."

Together, the two men moved into the building. Stepping off the elevator on the third floor, they noticed the loft's door hanging awkwardly on its hinges.

"Sandburg?" Jim called, as he and Simon carefully entered the apartment. "Tandy?"

There was no answer, but Jim followed the sound of his Guide's heart to the small downstairs bedroom. The french doors were shattered and the smell of blood assaulted Jim's senses as he rushed to the room.

"Oh my God!" Jim said as he entered the room to see Blair and Tandy motionless and bleeding on the floor. "Simon..."

"I'm on it, Jim," Simon said as he quickly moved to call for the medics to come up.

Jim carefully moved Tandy off of Blair and laid her flat on the floor. It appeared that the bleeding had stopped, but the little girl had lost a lot of blood.

Simon tucked the phone under his chin, pulling off his overcoat to cover Tandy. "I've got her, Jim. Go take care of Sandburg."

With a sharp nod, Jim went back to his partner. As he moved Blair so he was lying on the floor, Jim checked but found no exit wound. He opened the blood soaked shirt and examined the wound in Blair's abdomen. The bullet was still inside and there was no telling what damage it had done. Blair needed to get to a hospital.

Blair groaned quietly, almost silently, as he tried to shift away from the probing hands.

"Easy, Chief," Jim soothed, running his hand lightly through Blair's hair. "You're going to be all right, Blair."

Blair's eyes fluttered and opened slowly.

"Hang in there, buddy."

Blair's lips formed Jim's name, but no sound escaped before he faded into unconsciousness again.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" Scott ranted as he paced the apartment.

"Calm down, man," Jeff told his cousin, slouching in the only chair the tiny apartment had to offer.

"Calm down!!? Not only did we *not* get rid of two witnesses, but now there's a third!"

Jeff picked up the ashtray off the floor next to the chair and threw it at Scott. "Just shut up! If you hadn't gotten so nervous and fired that wild shot, we would have killed them both and been able to catch up with the other kid!" he yelled angrily. "We're just lucky we got

out of there before anyone showed up to check on the noise."

Scott rubbed his hip where the ashtray had hit him, but remained silent.

"We just have to think of another way," Jeff said.

"Why don't we just leave and go back home," Scott said, pulling a can of beer out of the little refrigerator. "We don't even have to do that, man. We can go somewhere else."

"No, we started this and we are going to finish it. I don't like to leave things half done, and as long as there is someone out there who can ID us, the job ain't finished."

Jim brought himself out of a light doze as he heard Blair moan quietly. He stood up and looked down at the pale face and took one cold hand in his own. "Hey, Chief, are you awake?" Jim said as he gently pressed his other hand against Blair's forehead.

Blair's eyes opened slowly and he stared up at his Sentinel. "Jim," his voice cracked quietly. "Tandy?"

"Tandy is going to be fine. You're going to be fine too, just rest now."

"Char... lie?" Blair pushed out with some effort.

"He's safe and sound. Joel took him home for the night."

Blair forced his eyes wide in an effort to remain awake.

"No," Jim scolded gently. "Go to sleep. I'll stay right here in case you need anything."

Blair knew he was losing the battle to stay awake, but managed to give Jim's hand a slight squeeze before he sank into comfortable oblivion.

Jim sat back down in the chair next to the bed, keeping a snug hold on Blair's hand. He let his thumb move slowly over Blair's knuckles and felt a sense of relief now that his partner had regained consciousness and seemed to be aware of his surroundings. The bullet had damaged Blair's gall bladder beyond repair and had lodged in his liver. He had lost a great deal of blood. Surgery was done to remove his gall bladder and the bullet, repair the liver, and blood was replaced. Blair would recover.

The door of the room in ICU opened with a soft swish as Simon stepped inside. "How is he doing, Jim," the Captain asked in a low voice.

"He woke up a few minutes ago," Jim answered. "He asked about Tandy and Charlie."

"That's a good sign."

"Yeah, he's going to be okay, Simon."

Simon nodded. "Want to go get some coffee?"

"How's Tandy doing?"

"Good. She's in some pain, of course, but she's been awake and wondering about Blair and her brother."

"They gave her something for the pain?" Jim questioned with a frown.

"Oh yeah, she was sound asleep when I left her room," Simon replied. "Megan's with her. Have you eaten?"

"How about Samuals?"

Simon sighed, "Concussion, and the doctor says he'll be off duty for about week."

Jim looked up at his Captain with a mix of anger and sorrow showing on his face. "Clark was a good man... a good cop."

"Yeah, he was." Realizing he wasn't going to get Jim out of the room, Simon pulled a chair up to sit next to the Detective.

"Any ideas on how we should proceed, sir?" Jim asked. "There are three witnesses to protect now."

"I've got guards outside Tandy's room, guards outside this room, and guards outside Joel's house." Simon said. "It's obvious that the perps were, or still are, planning to get rid of the witnesses. I wonder why they didn't just kill Blair and Tandy and be done with it? Charlie gave Megan a pretty good description of the men in alley the night he and Tandy witnessed the murder. He's positive the men that broke into the loft were the same two."

"My guess is that something happened and they panicked before they could be sure if they'd actually done the job or not," Jim growled, gently releasing Blair's hand to turn and face his Captain.

"Charlie said that Blair pushed him out the back door," Simon said. "Told him to run and not look back."

Jim rubbed his hands over his face. "They may be back to try to finish the job. We need to get Blair, Tandy, and Charlie into one place. Obviously Blair can't leave the hospital, so a safe house is out of the question."

Simon nodded. "How long will Blair need to be in ICU?"

"The doctor said that he can be moved into a private room tomorrow if necessary."

"How about we make that a semi-private room and put the kids in with Blair?"

Jim thought for a moment. "That could work. Blair will feel better with the kids nearby and I can keep an eye on all of them."

The next morning, Blair was moved into a semi private room. When his bed was rolled in, Tandy was already there, waiting anxiously with Megan.

"How is he," Tandy asked Jim when he came in just ahead of Blair's bed.

"I'm doing okay, Tandy," Blair said quietly. The bed was turned and pushed into place and Blair saw Tandy sitting on the bed next to his. Her small arm suspended in a sling as she sat on the edge of the bed. "How are you doing?" Blair asked her, trying to smile.

"I'm okay," Tandy said, managing a small smile.

Then the nurses pulled the curtain around Blair's bed and began fussing around getting him settled.

Jim sat on the bed next to Tandy. He smiled at Megan and asked, "How's it going?"

"Pretty good," Megan said, returning the smile as she stood next the bed on the opposite side of Tandy. "They took her IV out before moving her in here. She gets pain meds as needed."

Jim nodded and looked at Tandy. "Feeling okay?"

"Yeah, just a little sore," Tandy replied. "Is Blair really going to be okay?"

"Blair needs to rest so he'll get better," Jim said. "So we're going to have to keep the noise down to a dull roar, okay?"

Tandy nodded solemnly and curled up against Jim's side and he wrapped her in one strong, gentle arm.

They heard Blair groan quietly on the other side of the curtain.

"He's hurting?" Tandy asked softly.

"Yes, a little. The move down to this room wasn't easy on him," Jim answered. "The doctors had to fix him up like they did with you. Only Blair was hurt in the stomach instead of the shoulder. He's going to be fine though."

"Well, since things seem to be under control here, I'll be off," Megan said. She leaned down and kissed Tandy on the cheek. "Joel will be by in little while with Charlie. I thought I'd go by your place and pick up a few things for the kids. Is that all right with you, Jim?"

"Yeah, that would be great, Megan," Jim smiled. "Thank you."

One of the nurses pulled the curtain back part way and stepped out as the other left the room.

"Hi, my name is Kelly," she said to Jim and Tandy. "I'll be your day nurse. Can I get you anything?"

"How's he doing?" Jim asked, nodding towards the curtain.

"He's doing fine. The move caused some pain, but I gave Mr. Sandburg a shot of morphine and he's sleeping now."

Jim nodded, relief smoothing some of the worried lines in his face. "Would you like anything, Tandy? Some juice... a soda?"

"How about a popcicle?" Kelly asked.

Tandy smiled and nodded, "Yes, please."

"What flavor would you like?"

"Grape."

Joel dropped Charlie off into Jim's care about an hour after Megan left. It was the first time the children had seen each other since the shooting, and they were happy to be together again.

Blair woke briefly and was satisfied that all was well when he saw Tandy and Charlie sitting on her bed watching TV.

The Sentinel was sitting between the two beds and gave his hand a light squeeze. "How are you feeling?" Jim asked when he turned to see Blair's blue eyes watching him.

"Groggy," Blair whispered.

"Go back to sleep," Jim urged, his hand still holding his Guide's.

Blair smiled and closed his eyes, feeling safe with his Blessed Protector.

Megan returned just after lunch with the kids toys and clothes. She had even brought Blair's backpack with his books and glasses, along with clothes for him. "Sorry it took so long," she whispered when she entered the room and saw that the only one awake was Jim.

"No problem," Jim replied quietly, getting up to help the police inspector place the bundles in one corner of the room.

"So, how's everyone doing?" Megan asked, looking at the two kids sleeping on one bed and Blair snoring softly in the other.

"Pretty good. Blair's still sleeping off that last morphine injection. The kids passed out right after lunch."

"Do you need a break, Jim? I can stay here for a bit if you'd like."

"No, I'm fine for now, but thanks," Jim said.

It was nearly 10pm when Joel Taggert arrived to pick up Charlie. He

found Blair awake, watching TV with Jim who was holding a sleeping Charlie in his lap. Tandy was snuggled in with Blair.

"Hey, Joel," Blair greeted quietly.

"Hey, Blair, how are you feeling?" Joel asked with a smile.

"Doing better, thanks. Still a bit sore though," Blair answered, his voice still sounding weak and tired.

"I bet you are. And how about you, little one?"

"I'm okay," Tandy smiled.

Joel grinned, then turned his attention to Jim and the little boy he held. "Can I take him off your hands for the night?"

"Would you mind again, Joel?" Jim said. "I'd appreciate it. He needs to sleep in a bed."

"No problem at all," Detective Taggart smiled as he reached down to gently lift the limp little body into his arms. "Good night, gentlemen... and lady."

Tandy giggled and waved shyly.

"Later, Joel," Blair said.

Jim walked to the door and opened it as he thanked his friend again and said goodnight.

Jeff drove through the parking lot until he located an empty spot where they could watch the doors, but stay out of sight of anyone entering or exiting the hospital.

"Now what?" Scott asked nervously.

Jeff really didn't have a set plan. He tended to make things up as he went. With an impatient sigh, he ignored his cousin and sat staring at the doors when Taggart walked out carrying Charlie.

Bingo!

A short time later Jim stood and stretched. "I'm going to get some coffee. I'll be right back." As he let the door slip silently closed behind him, Jim looked down at the officer sitting just outside in the hall. "Good book?"

Officer Kirk glanced up. "Yeah, not too bad. Science fiction."

"Want some coffee?"

"Sure... if you don't mind."

"No problem."

In the parking lot, as Joel strapped the seatbelt around Charlie, Jeffrey moved quickly and quietly up behind the Detective. Joel didn't notice the man's approach, and barely registered the pain, as Jeff hit him squarely behind the ear with a rubber hammer. He crumpled to the ground and lay in a heap between the cars.

Scott unbuckled the seatbelt and pulled Charlie roughly into his arms.

Charlie's eyes went wide as he looked around and saw Joel on the ground. The boy looked into the face of the man that held him and began screaming when he recognized one of the men from the alley. Charlie pushed away frantically, but was abruptly stilled by another set of arms and a hand clamped over his small mouth. Tears sprang from the boy's eyes as he cried hysterically behind the hand.

Jeff quickly searched Joel and pulled a cell phone out of a pocket and his gun out of its shoulder holster.

"What are you doing?" Scott inquired in a low voice, looking around for anyone that might be in the parking lot.

"Just hang onto the kid and keep him quiet!" Jeff replied.

Jim was at the coffee machine down the hall when he realized he didn't have any change. Checking his wallet, he found a couple of dollar bills. _Need to hit the cash machine in the morning_, Jim thought absently as he pushed one of the bills into the changer.

Back in the room, the phone on the bedside table rang.

"Can you reach that, Tandy?" Blair asked the little girl at his side.

Tandy shifted carefully and reached for the phone. "Hello?"

"You love your brother, don't you?" a voice said.

"Yes," Tandy answered tentatively.

"Then I want you to come down to the basement."

"I-I can't."

Blair heard Tandy's soft words and noticed her tense against him. "Who is it, Tandy?"

"Get your little ass down here now, or little brother won't get any bigger!" the voice hissed.

"Okay," Tandy said in a small, scared voice.

The line went dead and Tandy hung up the phone.

"Tandy, who was that?" Blair asked again.

Tandy slid off the bed.

Worried at the girl's silence, Blair said a little more forcefully, "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

Wide frightened eyes looked up at Blair. "He's going to hurt Charlie," Tandy said.

"Who is?!" Blair asked.

"The man in the basement." Tandy moved towards the door. "He told me to go there."

"Tandy... no, wait!"

Jim was heading back with two cups of coffee when Officer Kirk rushed up to him.

"The girl is gone!" Kirk said.

Jim blinked, feeling as if he couldn't have possibly heard correctly. "What?!"

"I caught her sneaking out of the room, but when I picked her up she turned into a little wildcat!"

Jim handed the coffee to the Officer, his full Sentinel attention on the room he was now jogging towards. _What happened?! Why wasn't I paying more attention?! _he berated himself silently. _Why wasn't I listening?! _

--

"I couldn't hold her!" Officer Kirk said as Jim rushed away.

Jim heard his Guide immediately. Blair's heart was racing and he was quietly crying with pain, crying Jim's name.

Bursting through the door, Jim rushed to Blair's side as the young man tried to support himself against the side of the bed. The oxygen tube was lying on the bed and Blair was trying to pull the tape off to remove the IV from his hand. Shaky legs were barely holding him upright before Jim gently lifted him back up into bed.

"T-Tandy!" Blair gasped out in pain. "I tried..."

"I know, Chief," Jim said quickly, fitting the oxygen under Blair's face. "Just tell me what happened." He carefully checked the IV, picking up the roll of tape that a nurse had left behind on the bedside table.

"The phone rang... Tandy answered it. Then she said a man in the basement... was going to hurt Charlie."

Officer Kirk pushed open the door. "Is he okay?"

Jim didn't turn to face the man as he spoke, "Get security up here, I

want someone with Sandburg at all times. Call Captain Banks with Major Crimes... he's probably at home. I want you to check the parking lot for Detective Taggert, he may need help."

"Yes, sir, and where will you be?"

"In the basement," Jim growled.

"Yes, sir," Kirk said, a hint of nervousness in his voice.

Jim turned then, looking at the younger officer, "This wasn't your fault. You didn't do anything wrong."

Officer Kirk nodded, appreciating the words from the Detective, then left the room.

"Jim, I'm going with you!" Blair said, trying to slide off the bed again.

"No way, partner, not this time," Jim told him, gently holding the injured man down. "You're going to stay put" He pulled the blanket up over Blair.

Blair pushed weakly against Jim's hold. "But, Jim, you need me to watch your back!"

"Yes, I do need you... always. But you're in no shape to go anywhere. Stay here, Chief."

Blair stilled his struggles, since he didn't have the strength anyway, and stared up at Jim, "If anything happens to you or those kids, I won't be able to live with myself."

"Don't worry," Jim said, giving Blair's arm a reassuring squeeze before he turned and hurried out of the room.

"Jim... Jim, wait!"

"So, what do we do now?" Scott asked, as he followed Jeff carrying the squirming Charlie.

"We go wait in the basement for the kid's sister."

At the back of the hospital, the cousins found an unlocked door and slipped inside.

Officer Kirk stepped into Blair's room after seeing Jim leave. "Are you all right? You need anything?"

"No, I'm okay, thanks," Blair answered. "Have you found Detective Taggert yet?"

"I'm waiting for security. They should be here in a minute."

"I'll be all right until they get here."

"Detective Ellison said not to leave you alone."

"Taggart could be laying out in that parking lot injured!" Blair snapped impatiently. "There are nurses right outside there, and security will be here any second! I will be all right until they get here!" He winced at the pain in his stomach, letting his head fall back against the raised end of the bed.

"Okay... okay, I'll go!" Officer Kirk said, feeling a need to appease and calm Ellison's partner.

Blair waited a minute, contemplating what he was thinking of doing. Jim was going to kill him, but he felt some responsibility for Tandy getting away. Jim had gone down to the basement alone... he was Jim's backup... he needed to be there. The decision was made, and Blair reached down, removing the IV from his hand. He pushed the oxygen tubing off of his face and slid off the bed onto wobbly legs.

Tandy pushed against the heavy metal door at the bottom of the stairs, but it wouldn't open. She kicked and beat on the door, pushing with all the strength her tired and hurting body could muster, but it wouldn't move. Finally, crying and angry, Tandy slid down and sat on the cold concrete floor.

Jim got off the elevator one floor up from the basement and walked down the stairs. He was standing at the door, listening for anyone that might be on the other side, when a sound came to him. Refocusing his hearing, Jim found that it was someone sobbing, and it was coming from the stairwell below. Carefully, his gun ready if needed, Jim descended the stairs.

"Tandy!" Jim called, taking the last of the stairs two at a time. He gathered the girl into his arms. "Are you all right?"

"I-I can't get in," Tandy sobbed. "The door won't open!"

Jim surveyed the door and saw a keypad on the wall next to the door. It was the underground garage used by hospital personnel and the door wouldn't open without the proper code. "Shhh," he tried to sooth. "It's okay."

"No, it's not! He's going to hurt Charlie!" Tandy wailed.

"No one's going to hurt Charlie," Jim told her as he climbed the stairs back up to the basement level.

Blair decided that walking around the hospital in one of their *fashionable* gowns would attract too much attention to himself. So, with slow determination and a lot of effort, he pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a button front shirt that Megan had brought. Unable to bend over to put his shoes on, Blair hoped that no one would notice his bare feet as he stepped out into the hallway and headed for the elevators.

Scott and Jeff had settled themselves in a darkened corner. They could watch both the elevator and the stairs, but there was little chance of anyone seeing them as they entered the basement. Charlie was wedged between the two men on the floor. His small hands bound with electrical tape, and his mouth gagged by the incredible fear he felt.

"Where is she?!" Scott asked, keeping his voice low in the darkness.

"Give her a few more minutes," Jeff hissed. "She probably had to use the stairs. The cops would not have let her stand around and wait for an elevator."

"She's just a kid, and she hurtâ€¦ remember? What if she couldn't get away?"

Jeff hesitated a moment, then his face turned evilly dark, shiny black eyes on the boy next to him. "Then I guess she's out one little brother."

Scott closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the wall. _Oh shit!_

--

Jim was standing outside the basement door, still holding Tandy in his arms. Her cries had calmed to short sobbing gasps as she rested her head on Jim's shoulder. Focusing his hearing on the room beyond the door, Jim heard three heartbeats. One slow and calm, another faster but controlled, and a third, smaller beat, that was hammering at a frightened triple time. Jim could only visualize the terrified little boy as he heard the words that passed between the two men inside.

A dangerously calm anger filled Jim. He carefully set Tandy on the floor and crouched in front of her. "I want you to stay right here, sweetheart. Okay?"

"You gonna go get Charlie?" Tandy asked, her tear filled eyes pleading.

"Yes, I'm going to get Charlie. I need you to stay here and wait for me. Can you do that?"

Tandy nodded.

"Good girl." Then he slowly pushed the door open just enough to slip inside.

Blair entered the empty elevator and quickly hit the *door closed* button. Just as the door slid shut, a pair of large dark hands reached in and forced the doors to open.

Jumping back against the wall and yelping in surprise, Blair gasped

at the pain the too quick movement caused.

"Sandburg?!! What the hell is going on here?!" Captain Banks barked when the elevator doors were opened.

"Oh man... Simon, am I glad to see you," Blair sputtered. "You have to help me."

"Damn straight I'll help you!" Simon moved into the car and put an arm around Blair's shoulders. "Right back to bed!"

Blair pushed away from the Captain. "No! I need to help Jim!"

"Where is he?"

"He went down to the basement to find Tandy and Charlie."

"Okay, I'll send some men down as soon as you're back in bed."

"No! Damn it, Simon, there isn't time for that! And if you make me go back to bed, I'll just find a way to sneak out again!"

Simon sighed, knowing that Blair was right, but not wanting to admit it.

"Please! Jim needs me! I'm suppose to be watching his back!"

"Damnit, Sandburg, Jim's going to kill me for this, butâ€¦," Simon said, reaching over and hitting the button for the basement. As the doors closed, his cell phone jingled to life in his overcoat.

—

Chink! Squeeeeak! Ka-chunk!

—

"What was that?" Scott whispered nervously.

"The door," Jeff answered in a low voice. "The kid must be here." He reached down and shook Charlie by one arm. "Say something to her so she knows you're here."

Charlie swallowed, his throat feeling dry and sore. His mouth moved silently several times before he finally got the sound out.

"T-Tandy... iszat you?"

Jim remained quiet, trying to pinpoint where Charlie and the other two were located.

Jeff poked the boy in the arm. "Call her again... louder!"

"Tandy, where are you?!"

Blair was leaning against the back wall of the elevator car, supporting himself on the railing, concentrating on not passing out from the pain. He watched Simon click off his cell phone and drop it back into a pocket. "Have they found Joel?" he asked in a tight voice.

"Yeah, just talked to him," Simon replied, watching Blair closely. "He's got a slight concussion, but he'll be fine. He insists on mobilizing our people. How are you holding up?"

Blair nodded, swallowing hard, "I'm okay."

—
Bullshit! Jim's going to have my head on a platter! Simon thought silently.

The elevator came to a slightly jerky stop when it reached the basement and Blair crumbled to the floor. Simon was quickly at his side suggesting that Blair ride the elevator back up and let him find Jim.

"No... no, I'll be fine," Blair insisted.

"Simon! Blair!" Jim said quietly, but with great force. He moved into the opened elevator, blocking the doors.

Both Simon and Blair jumped as if they'd been shot.

"What the hell is going on here?! What is Sandburg doing here?!" Jim turned his attention to his young friend before the Captain could answer. "I told you to stay in bed, Chief."

"T-Tandy!?" Charlie's small voice echoed through the basement.

"Char...!" Blair began, but a large hand clamped over his mouth.

"Shhh!" Jim hissed. His head cocked to one side slightly as he listened to the voices only he could hear.

"Did you see anyone come off the elevator?" Scott's whispered voice inquired.

"I don't see anyone!" Jeff's angry whisper replied. "Someone probably hit the basement button by accident."

Jim pulled Simon close and whispered, "There's two of them and Charlie." He pointed a finger in the direction he'd heard the voices come from. "They're over there. If we stand up, they'll see us."

Simon nodded.

"Where's Tandy?" Blair asked in a whisper.

Jim listened for a moment, just long enough to verify that the child was where he'd left her. "She's just outside the door. She's okay... just scared." Jim reached up and pushed the red *STOP* button so the

elevator wouldn't leave. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

Both Simon and Blair nodded.

The two men heard Jim open the door to bring Tandy inside and thought that she was leaving.

"Hey, little girl!" Jeff called. "Don't leave! Don't you want to get your brother back?!"

Less than a minute later, Jim reappeared with a still sobbing Tandy, who fell into Blair's outstretched arms. Jim moved them both into a corner of the elevator so they were totally out of sight.

"Are you all right, Tandy?" Blair soothed. "I was so worried about you."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Tandy cried into Blair's shoulder and hugged him tight.

Blair stifled a gasp of pain as her small arms closed around him. Jim started to reach for Tandy, but Blair waved him back and continued the sooth the girl. "I'm okay, Jim. Go get Charlie."

Jim nodded and turned to Simon. Silently the two men stood and moved out of the elevator.

"Something's not right, man," Scott said nervously. "If that kid was out there, she would have answered him when he called."

"Yeah yeah, I know," Jeff said quickly, chewing on his thumbnail. "Let me think."

"It's prolly Jim and Blair!" Charlie spouted.

"That means it's the cops, Jeff," Scott said, his voice trembling slightly. "I knew this was all wrong, man."

Jeff turned and angrily pointed a finger at his cousin, "Damnit! If you don't shut the hell up!" He saw something out of the corner of his eye and swung his head back around. "Shit, it *is* Ellison!"

"Cascade Police! Come out with your hands in the air!" Captain Banks bellowed, his gun pointed in the same direction as Jim's.

Neither Jim or Simon had seen the Jeff, Scott, or Charlie, but Jim had them in his sights by using his Sentinel hearing. Simon was playing off of Jim's instincts.

Jeff retrieved Taggart's gun from a pocket and shoved it at Scott.

Scott stared dumbly at the weapon.

"Take it!" Jeff demanded as he pulled another gun out. "I've got mine here."

"Jeffâ€¦ no more!"

"What?!"

"I've had enough! I want nothing more to do with this, man!"

"What about that guy we killed? We're gonna go down for that if we give up!"

"*WE* killed? *YOU* did the deed, man! I ain't goin' down for murder!"

Jim was listening to the conversation. "There's no use hiding!" he yelled. "We know you're there. Throw out your weapons and come out!"

Scott stared at Jeff and yelled back, "I'm coming out and I'm bringing the boy with me! I'm unarmed!" He stood, holding his hands high enough to prove that he wasn't carrying a weapon, then reached down and pulled Charlie up into his arms.

Jeff remained seated on the floor, seething with anger. He felt betrayed.

"All right," Simon told Scott. "Put the child down and move out of there slowly. Keep both hands where they can see them."

Carefully, Scott let Charlie slide down to stand on his feet, then remove the tape from his wrist. "I'm sorry this happened," he told the boy.

Jeff squeezed his eyes shut and let the angry tears flow. "Don't do this to us, Scott," he said, opening his eyes and staring up at his cousin's back.

Charlie looked up into Scott's sad eyes, then turned and trotted off to be collected by Jim.

"Now, keep your hands up and move towards us," Simon instructed.

Jim pushed Charlie behind him and again aimed his gun at Scott's chest.

Scott pushed his arms into the air again and took two steps forward.

There was a shuffling sound and flurry of movement behind Scott, but before anyone could stop it, Jeff had shot the young man in the back. Scott let out a grunt, his eyes wide and staring for a moment, then he sank to the concrete floor and lay still.

Both Jim and Simon squeezed off shots as Jeff ducked and fled deeper into the dimly lit basement.

"CHARLIE!!!!" Tandy screamed when she and Blair heard the shots fired.

Blair reached for the girl as she tried to move away from him,

pulling her back against him. "Shhh, it's okay, Tandy. I'm sure Charlie is fine." _God, let him be all right!_

--

"Take Charlie back to Blair," Jim told Simon. "I'll follow him and try to send him your way. We can't let him get out of here."

"I'll send the kids and Blair up in the elevator," Simon said, taking Charlie by the hand and leading him in the opposite direction.

Jim found it easy to track Jeff though. The man didn't even seem to be trying to be quiet as he moved among the shelves and stacks of boxes, knocking things over as he went. Jim could also follow the desperate mutterings of a man that was on the very edge of sanity.

The basement was not terribly large and it didn't take Jim long to *herd* Jeff around towards Simon.

Simon gently pushed Charlie into the elevator and crouched to Blair as the two children hugged and clung to each other. "I'm sending you back up with the kids," Simon told Blair.

"Is Jim all right?" Blair asked worriedly. "I heard the shots and ..."

"He's fine," Simon said quickly, cutting Blair off. "Contact Taggart when you get up there and tell him what's going on."

There was a crash as Jeff stumbled over several metal tray-tables and came into view in front of the elevators. Simon cursed, reaching to push the *door closed* button, not realizing he'd missed the panel in his rush to exit the elevator.

Blair pushed Tandy and Charlie into the corner of the elevator under the panel and reached up to press the third floor button. His hand froze and he watched in horror as Jeffrey got off the first shot, sending a bullet creasing across Simon's jaw and knocking him hard to the floor.

Simon didn't move and Jeff turned his attention to the three people in the elevator. "Finally, I can take care of all three of you at once," he sneered.

—

Shit! Jim silently cursed when he heard the shot fired and quickly picked his way through the trail of debris that Jeff had left in the aisle.

Blair pushed the button under his hand and rolled himself out of the elevator as the doors closed.

Bullets pinged and ricocheted off the metal elevator doors.

"Noooooooo!" Jeff wailed when he realized the children were safe again.
"It's just not fair!!"

Blair stood, grabbing a piece of PCV piping that was leaning against a shelving unit. "It's more than fair from where I stand!"

When Jeff turned, Blair swung the pipe and connected with the side of his head. The PCV broke on impact, but sent Jeff to his knees, dropping the gun to clutch his head.

"Sandburg!" Jim called as he burst upon the scene.

Blair turned towards Jim, and without warning was tackled hard around the waist by Jeffrey. Pain ripped through Blair as Jeff hit him, head first, in the stomach and sent them both to the floor. Quickly, Jeff rolled off of Blair, looking for and finding the gun he'd dropped.

Jim pulled off one shot that connected with Jeffrey's chest.

"Blair!" Jim called as he rushed forward and knelt by Blair's side.

"I'm okay, big guy," Blair pushed out through gritted teeth. "Check on Simon."

Quickly Jim moved to Simon's side. The Captain was already regaining consciousness and Jim checked him over for other injuries. Simon cursed as he pulled out his handkerchief and held it to his bleeding jaw.

"Um... Jim," Blair's weak voice called.

"Yeah, Chief, how're you doing?" Jim replied.

"Remember I said that I was okay?"

Jim turned to look at his partner.

"Well, I inadvertently lied."

"Oh my God!" Simon said as he and Jim saw the blood seeping through the front of Blair's shirt.

Jim scrambled back to Blair's side. "It's going to be okay, Chief." He pulled open Blair's shirt and saw that most of the surgical staples had been pulled free. "Just hang in there."

Simon was already on his cell phone getting help.

Jim pulled a box of gauze off a shelf and pressed the thick pads against Blair's open wound. "You're going to be okay."

Blair groaned with the pain. Simon retrieved a blanket and covered Blair with it.

"He's going to all right," Jim told Tandy and Charlie as he sat down on the waiting room's sofa.

Tandy and Charlie moved to sit on either side of Jim, snuggling into his big arms.

"The doctor is fixing him up now and he'll be back in his room soon."

"Are you going to call his mother?" Tandy suddenly asked.

"No, she lives in a different state and I don't want to worry her right now."

Tandy nodded solemnly.

Jim felt Charlie go limp against his side and smiled down at the sleeping boy, thankful that both children were safe. Charlie had been uninjured and there had been no further damage to Tandy's shoulder.

Jim looked down at the little girl sitting beneath his left arm. Everything had happened so fast over the last few days that there had been no time to find out about the kid's parents. He didn't know if now was a good time, butâ€¦

"Tandy, where is your Mom and Dad?" Jim asked gently and felt her tense against him.

Tandy sat silently for nearly a full minute before her tiny voice spoke so softly that Jim would have missed it without his Sentinel hearing.

"Daddy left just before Charlie was born." Tandy looked up at Jim and sighed sadly, trying not to cry. "Mommy took me to school one day and asked me to pick up Charlie on my way home."

"Did she ask you to do that very often?" Jim asked.

"Yesâ€¦ two or three times a week. Depended on work. Sometimes we didn't see her 'til the morning when we got up."

"Who took care of you and Charlie?"

"I did." Tandy pulled her legs up and snuggled closer to Jim. "That last timeâ€¦ Mommy didn't come home. I took Charlie to daycare and went to school, but Mommy still didn't come home."

Jim noticed that the little girl was clinging tightly to his arm and there were tears spilling down her cheeks.

"She never came home. After we ran out of food, we left."

"You just left? You didn't call anyone?" Jim asked softly.

Tandy shrugged. "No one to call."

"You couldn't tell your teacher?"

"I did, but Mrs. Burnett thought I was joking."

Jim kissing the top of Tandy's head and hugged her. "Why don't you try to sleep too? That medicine the doctor gave you should have stopped the pain by now."

Tandy gave a huge yawn and nodded.

One week later

"I'm so glad that Child Welfare was able to find a foster home that would take both Tandy and Charlie together. The Nelson's seemed like a real nice couple with a good home," Blair said as Jim pulled his socks and shoes on for him.

"Yeah, the Nelson's live in Puyallup and have a few acres of land, lots of animals. Sounds like the kind of environment the kid's need," Jim said. "I gave them that joint e-mail address I signed us up for the other day so we can stay in contact with them and the kids."

"That was a great idea, Jim. Now we can just access the e-mail anytime. I'm going to miss them though."

"Yeah, it's going to seem quiet now," Jim agreed, tying Blair's sneakers.

"How can parents just *leave* their kids like that?"

"I couldn't tell you, Chief."

"Think the police will ever find their mother?" Blair asked when Jim straightened up.

"I doubt it. As close as I can figure, it's been almost two months since they last saw her." Jim sighed, "It would've been a lot easier to figure the time table if that teacher had taken Tandy seriously."

"Man, I can't believe that teacher didn't believe her. I always listen to my students when they come to me." Blair said adamantly. "What reason would she have had to make it up?"

Simon pushed through the door with a wheelchair in tow. "You two ready to go home?" The large white bandage on his jaw standing out in stark contrast against his dark skin.

"I was ready yesterday, man," Blair said with a grin, pushing himself off the bed. His left arm went around his middle and he groaned at the shock of pain the movement caused.

"Go slow there," Jim scolded, gently steadying his friend as he moved slowly to the wheelchair. "Simon, what about Carter and Allen?"

"Scott Carter is doing better, but they don't know yet if he'll regain the use of his legs since the bullet nicked his spinal cord,"

Simon answered, holding the chair as Blair settled into it. "He's talking to us though. Jeffrey Allen is another story. He survived the gunshot, but he's headed for the psychiatric ward for evaluation as soon as possible."

"Can you two talk and walk at the same time?" Blair said impatiently. "I want to get home."

"What's the hurry, Sandburg?" Simon chuckled. "Afraid you'll miss your cartoons?"

"No, man, I want to check my e-mail!"

"It's only been a couple of days," Jim smiled. "Give them a chance to settle in first."

It was a week before Jim and Blair received the first e-mail message from the Nelson's.

"Jim!" Blair called excitedly from the table where he had his laptop set up. "We got our first e-mail from the Nelson's and Tandy and Charlie!"

Jim, grinning from ear to ear, quickly joined his friend at the table to read the message over his shoulder.

—

Dear Jim and Blair,

Tandy and Charlie have settled in nicely over the past week. Tandy is enrolled in the third grade and Charlie is doing half-days in Kindergarten, and they are making friends. They seem to be adjusting well, though they both still have nightmares. Dr. Carman, the Psychologist they're seeing, says that it will take some time, but they will pass. My husband, Dan, and I would like to thank you both again for taking care of the children and not letting them be placed in separate homes.

We are all wondering how Blair is feeling. He must be home by now. Hopefully he is healing well.

Please feel free to stay in contact with the children. They speak of both of you often and they have obviously bonded with you.

I'm going to get off now, because the kids are impatient to tell you *everything*.

Take care,

Carol Nelson

—

—

Hi Jim and Blair,

How are you? Me and Charlie are fine.

It is so cool here. We got to milk a cow. I never milked a cow before and then we got to taste the milk. It tastes funny but mom told us that they do lots of stuff to the milk before we get it the way we get it in the store. I think I like the kind in the store with the stuff in it better. Did you know you can milk a goat too? We were gonna do that, but I didn't think she'd like that much and the goat has horns. I really didn't wanna us get horned, so I let dad do the goat milking and me and Charlie just watched. I might do the goat when I get bigger. I did get to help with cleaning the goats room. It's called a stall you know. It smells real bad. Worse then anything and it made me sneeze. Even worse than Charlie's socks when he doesn't change them after school. We gots a horse too. We gots three of them. Mom said she'd teach us how to ride and when we know how we can maybe have a horse too. I think I 'd like to have a horse. And it would be one of my very own. We picked the eggs. Did you know they come out of the chicken's butt? I never knew that. Charlie says he won't eat eggs no more now that he knows where they come from. I thought it was weird too, but then I tasted one of the funny colored ones that came out of the chicken's butt and it tastes just like the ones we get in the store, so I guess they're okay. Dad brought two pigs home today. They are little and cute and make funny noises. Dad says they will grow up and then we will have pork chops and bacon. I don't know what that has to do with the pigs growing up. Oh yeah, we gots dogs here. Dad says March is a Australian Shep Herd and Harbor is a Lab or Door. I don't know which. They are so much fun. We play and they chase balls and sticks. There are cats here too, but they aren't very friendly. Mom says they are working cats and eat the mouses in the barn.

—

Guess what! Mrs. Nelson said we can call them mom and dad cause we felt funny calling them Mrs. Nelson and Mr. Nelson. They said that our real mom wouldn't mind if we did and that she had to go away and she would be glad we gots another mom and dad now to take care of us since she can't. It's nice having a mom and dad again.

—

Me and Charlie have our rooms in the upstairs part of the house. At first I wasn't sure I wanted to sleep alone because we always had a room together before. But I like it and we can go through the bathroom if we want to visit. Mom cooks good to. She made bread one day while we were at school. Mom takes us to the bus stop every morning and she meets us at the bus stop when we get home.

Got a A on my spelling test and I was the only one that got all the words right. We are starting times-tables in math. I like this school better then my old school. Mrs. Carpenter is a really nice teacher. Charlie got a gold star today in coloring.

Mom says I gots to take a bath and go to bed now. She is going to check the spelling, but I think I do pretty good by myself. Charlie is already in bed, but I promised to say that he loves you both. I love you too and I hope you guys will come visit us.

Hugs

Tandy

—

"Sounds like they're doing well," Jim said with a smile.

"Yeahâ€| they even call the Nelson's *mom and dad*," Blair said.

"They have a family now."

"A family," Blair said softly. "Just like us."

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End  
file.